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W. T. Rolfe

DUTIES OF PARENTS IN AID OF THE TEACHER.

A

LECTURE

BEFORE THE

Norfolk County Teachers' Association,

JUNE, 1852,

BY REV. JAMES H. MEANS,

OF DORCHESTER.

Published by the Association.

BOSTON:
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LECTURE.

It would probably be considered presumptuous in one who can boast of only three months' practical experience in the art of school-teaching, were he to attempt a discussion concerning school management, or the best methods of instruction.

I willingly, therefore, turn from all such themes, to consider, at the request of some of your Association, a topic, which, though it may not call for any high flights of fancy or poetry, nor lead us far from a beaten track, may yet have the better merit of presenting practical, and perhaps not unneeded truth; — I mean *the relation existing between parents and teachers, and the duties which grow out of that relation.*

I start with the position, that parents are to be the prime educators of the young.

The family is a divine institution. God thus joins the solitary together: and by no forgetfulness, nor dependence on others, can parents throw off their responsibility, or escape the evil consequences of neglecting their own charge.

Home influence must be, unless in extraordinary cases, the most powerful in moulding the mind and character of the young.

The influence of the school may come next, but is not equal to it.

Not only are more hours passed at home than at school, but the affection which the child feels for its parents, and the reverence that ever should be, and usually is, blended with that, makes the young heart peculiarly susceptible to their control. Not by direct precept only, but by the daily life and example, by the spirit that pervades the house, are they pouring upon those there growing up, a flood of influences that must be more potent and decisive than all others.

And that home influence follows the young wherever they go. Amid their sports and the dangers of evil companionship, it enwraps and shields them. And will it not also go with them to school, and make them punctual, diligent, obedient, or irregular, lazy, and insubordinate? Facts in abundance sustain this view. They prove — what may be logically inferred from the position the parent occupies — that the influence of home is felt powerfully in the school-room. Regarding this, I know I may appeal to the experience of those before me. You have felt it both for good and for ill. Teachers, have you not?

And now, what parent is there who would not exert this influence which he possesses, for the best ends,— for the welfare, the improvement of his child? Suffer me, then, to point out some of the ways of doing this.

1st. Parents should *sympathize with* the teacher.

He is their deputy for a time. He cannot supply their place, nor relieve them of their responsibility, but he shares that with them, and gives them no unimportant aid. To him they commit their most precious treasures, and entrust him with an influence over them, inferior only to their own. His aim and theirs are coincident, — the mental and moral improvement of the young. If he is suc-

cessful, they are benefited; if he fails, they have cause of sorrow. It seems hardly possible that sympathy can ever be wanting between those whose cares and interests are so interwoven. It cannot be, when the true nature of this relation of which we speak is clearly understood.

Besides, the teacher has a hard work. In the most favorable circumstances, perplexity, weariness, disappointment, wearing and incessant toil, must often attend it. Do parents find it difficult to manage half a dozen children — to keep them quiet — to answer their questions — to secure their obedience? Does their patience sometimes give out, and their eye wander often to the clock, in hope that the school-hour or bed-time is near? Let them remember that the teacher has not half a dozen, but half a hundred to guide and control; a most heterogeneous set sometimes, all thrown together, with habits and tempers as varied as their countenances; with wants so numerous that hundred-handed Briareus might be taxed to satisfy them, and tricks so manifold and cunningly contrived, that the teacher needs, like Argus, a hundred eyes. Let them consider that it is amid all these cares and distractions, that he is to find time to give to each of the fifty or more, the instruction he needs, and advance each one a step at least each day. Were all willing to study, and anxious to be taught, this would be no slight task; but when the favorite motto of the majority is, that "all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," — a motto which they adopt in an extremely liberal sense, — it becomes a labor indeed, an up-hill process, calling for resolution, patience, unflagging zeal. The teacher needs to be sustained by the power of sympathy, that which more than anything else cheers the heart and strings the arms of weary laborers. He ought to be

able to say to himself, when success crowns his efforts, "I shall not go unrequited by the gratitude of parents;" — and when he toils to no purpose, to say also, "Well, I shall not be rashly condemned; there are those about me, who will give me credit for faithful endeavors, even though they have failed of the desired end."

Parents should not only feel sympathy, but show it, — show it by kind looks and salutations at meeting the teacher; by courtesy and polite attentions in social life; by bidding him welcome to their homes; — above all, by visiting the school occasionally, not as captious critics, — not to find fault and fill the gossiping neighborhood with their ill-natured and incorrect judgment; but to see for themselves what are the difficulties of the teacher, — to let him know that he has the light of their countenance, and that not only are their treasures with him, but their hearts are there also. Such visits, I am sure, will be gladly hailed by every good teacher; they will encourage his heart, — they will deepen his interest in his work, and in his scholars, — they will exert an influence of which he may be hardly conscious himself, but which, nevertheless, will be real, making him faithful, devoted, and anxious for success.

2dly. Parents should show *respect* for the teacher. We claim for him more than sympathy. He occupies a high office. The culture of the mind and heart is intrinsically an honorable and excellent work. We admire the finished masterpieces of the sculptor; but a symmetrical and well-moulded character is a sublimer production, than even a Venus de Medici or a Greek Slave! The teacher's work is also enduring. Its influence is felt not only through the life-time of the scholar, but it descends as a legacy of good or evil to his children and to

their offspring. It radiates also from him, like the beams from the sun, affecting those with whom he comes in daily contact. There was an old superstitious belief in the efficacy of the king's touch to cure certain maladies. We hold to the royalty of intelligence and virtue. We have faith in the power of every well-trained man to heal by his touch the ills with which society groans. And we say, therefore, all honor to those who are doing so much to train men for usefulness. Say not that they are hirelings, that they have their reward in the stipend (often pitiful enough) which you give them. Had they no other motive, no warmer interest than that excites, they would not toil as they do year after year; they would not aim diligently as they do, after increased acquisitions; they would not meet often as they do in conventions like these, — seeking new light for their guidance, — aiming with a generous ambition that never rests, after a still more perfect fitness for their noble work. No; such enthusiasm as is manifested here, comes not from the thought of the quarterly pay-day; it comes from the interest felt in *each* day's duty, — from the conviction that the service in which they are engaged demands, and is worthy of, the untiring concentration of all their powers.

This is the spirit of the true teacher, and I say that, because of it, he has a right to the sincere respect of the community. His reputation should be carefully guarded. He should be shielded from the carpings of prejudice, — from the sneers of envy, — from the shallow criticisms of ignorance, — from the assaults of malice. Every idle rumor that may be afloat concerning him, is not to be believed without investigation. Just as good people sometimes say, "You must be careful what you say against our minister," so should the warning be sounded,

"Take care how you speak against our teacher." We do not claim infallibility for either pastor or pedagogue; but we do insist that they should not be hastily condemned.

And as respect is due to the position of the teacher, so also is it essential to his best influence in the school. Let the children hear him censured and sneered at at home, and most certainly they will care less for his instructions; if indeed they do not become openly impudent and insubordinate. Incalculable harm has been done by the thoughtlessness of parents in this matter. Not only have good instructors been disheartened, but scholars have been encouraged to waste their time, to neglect their studies, to violate just regulations, — in short, to do themselves an injury which can never be wholly repaired. Justice to the teacher, then, and the good of the scholar, alike demand that he should be regarded with sincere respect.

3dly. It is the duty of parents to enforce the *regular attendance* of their children at school. I confess that I approach this topic with a feeling of despondency. The complaint is so universal, and so continually repeated; all efforts to abate this glaring evil have hitherto been so ineffectual; the strongest arguments and most urgent entreaties have seemed so utterly in vain, that I feel as if doomed to the labor of the fabled Sisyphus, to roll with long toil a huge stone to the top of the hill, which is sure to roll back the moment my hands are removed. But there is no escape. I must utter my protest against this most formidable obstacle to the teacher's success, and make my appeal to every parent's common sense, or be faithless to the position I have assumed.

By the returns to the Board of Education for the last year, it appears that the average attendance was 46,970

less than the average number belonging to the schools; that is, nearly 47,000 children, or about one-eighth of the whole, were daily absent. Now let me ask, how can children be in any way profited by school when they do not attend? or how can they progress in studies, which, like arithmetic, require a knowledge of previous steps for each new advance, when they lose a lesson here and there, not going through the book steadily, but with "a hop, skip, and jump?" It may aid you to answer the question, if you will tell me, how heavy a weight you can lift with a chain, every eighth link of which is good for nothing.

Nor are they the only sufferers. An irregular scholar in a class is like a wheel that runs hard in a machine, retarding the movement of the whole. They cannot keep up with the class, the teacher has not time to hear them separately, and so all the rest must be kept back for them, and the whole appearance of the school be seriously injured.

Nor does the evil end here; for this annoys and discourages the teacher; it subjects him to undeserved censure; it stirs his soul sometimes with a righteous indignation, and makes him wish he could inflict some penalty on the parents, where it rightfully belongs.

I am far from exaggerating the evils which follow this abuse. Could these teachers speak, they would each a tale unfold, of grief to themselves and injury to their scholars, thus caused, which would make my words seem tame indeed. They would say, I think, that this irregularity of attendance is the greatest obstacle they are obliged to encounter. Now is this a *necessary* evil? If so, we must submit. But is it? I answer, No. Cases of sickness of course will occur, and occasionally there

indifference of parents occasions more irregularity than all other causes together.

Where, as in many districts, the school is kept only for a fraction of the year, every day is precious beyond account; when it continues through the year, abundant holidays and vacations are provided, amounting often to one-fourth of the time; and yet upon the most frivolous pretences;—to go on some errand,—to pick a few berries, worth a dime or two,—because of some *indisposition*, (the word is ambiguous, and we fear parent and child do not always use it in the same sense) or a headache, which strangely passes away with the passing of the school-hour; or merely because of some whim of the child, which the weak and over-fond parent indulges;—upon such trifling and ridiculous pretexts are thousands of the scholars of our State every day permitted to loiter at home, to their own great loss, and to the derangement of our whole school system.

Our stern ancestors had a vigorous way of grappling with evils, similar to this, which I almost wish we could imitate. By a law passed by the colony of Massachusetts Bay in 1642, the selectmen were empowered to take children from the custody of those parents who "after admonition" "were negligent of their duty" in giving them a suitable education, and bind them out to other masters. Unfortunately these "blue laws" are out of fashion, or not a few children, we think, would soon change their abodes. Parents must be left now to their own course; and the children, alas! must often reap the sad consequences.

4thly. Parents *should provide books* and other needed helps for their children. It will do them little good to go to school, if they have nothing to do when they get there.

may be other valid excuses for absence; but the culpable Books have been termed the tools with which they are to work, and they should have a full set of the best. This will be found the truest economy, as much for the scholar, as for the mechanic.

And when we consider that the means of a most excellent education are afforded to all, without any cost, it seems strange indeed, that, except in cases of extreme penury, there should be any hesitation in regard to the small outlay required for this purpose. Yet some seem to think that school-books, like bottles of wine, grow better the longer they are kept; and that dirt on the pages, like cobwebs on the cork, are a sign of superior excellence. But no; the discussions of the last few years, and the attention paid to the philosophy of teaching, have developed new methods of instruction, and led to the preparation of new manuals, of which every scholar should have the advantage. There have been also changes in human affairs, calling for corresponding changes in the books used in particular departments. What is an old map of the United States good for, in these days of annexation? or who would be satisfied with a book of science minus all modern discoveries?

Besides, in order that the teacher may most profitably employ his time, the scholars must be classified; and this requires a uniformity in text-books. I have read * of an independent mother insisting that the teacher should hear her boy recite from the book which he happened to have. "Very well, madam," answered the obliging preceptor, "I will devote to him just his proportion of

* I quote from memory from one of the lectures before the American Institute of Instruction, to which I am indebted also for some other suggestions.

time. I am able to allow to that study only one hour daily; as I have fifty scholars I will spend with him one minute and one-fifth, and hope that you will be pleased with his progress."

She went away with some new ideas in regard to a teacher's duties and a pupil's rights.

Let scholars, then, be well supplied with the tools they need. The niggardly parsimony that refuses this, does them a serious injury, as well as "teaches the lesson that money is worth more than knowledge." Let clothes be passed along from one to another, if need be, turned inside out and upside down; economize any other way you please: but let each child have the best books the country can supply.

In the 5th place, parents *should not directly interfere in school management*. To the teacher's own judgment is entrusted the regulation of all within the school-room. If he plainly mistakes his course, he can be removed; but while he holds his post, he is supreme there; or at least, amenable officially only to the committee. They stand between the teacher and the community, ready to examine all complaints, and, as far as possible, to remedy all difficulties. But it is a great mistake for parents to think that they have a right to enter the school, and use to the instructor the language of dictation or menace, or attempt to control him in the discharge of his duties. He ought courteously but firmly, to repel such interference.

They are not in general fitted to judge and decide in this matter. They may be able to give suggestions in regard to their own children, and these every good teacher will gladly receive; but they cannot understand what is best for the school as a whole. Nothing but confusion would result from admitting their power to speak there

with authority. How great is the diversity of opinion, for example, in regard to the studies to be pursued. Some really seem to be afraid that their children will get more "learning" than themselves; they think all that is necessary is a knowledge of what an illiterate father called the "three *rs*," reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic; whilst others would be almost ready to have these essentials passed over, for the sake of algebra, rhetoric, philosophy, physiology, and a smattering of French and Latin. So some think that the teacher's face should be always wreathed in smiles, and the paths of learning made delightful to the most reluctant feet. They look upon a school-room as a nursery for incarnate angels — "sweet buds of innocence;" — while others go to the opposite extreme, and think his brow should be clothed with terrors, and his pupils fear him as one who hath eyes in the back of his head, and a hand ever uplifted over the offender, whose blow leaveth aching memories behind.

Now how can these varying tastes all be suited? How can a school flourish if it have not one master, but many? If parents are aggrieved, they have always an appeal to the Committee; and if that Board do not give them redress, they may turn them out at the next annual balloting.

There is one point connected with this part of my subject, but of such importance, that I wish to present it under a separate head, and therefore say,

6thly, that parents should *uphold the teacher in discipline.* All will admit that order and due subordination must be maintained in every school; and in order to this, the power of correction must be lodged with its head, not as a nominal power alone; it must at times be exerted.

Beautiful as is moral suasion, and wonderful as are often its results, I believe we must sometimes fall back on the old remedy, "a rod for the fool's back." There are some whose strongest moral sympathies lie in the palms of their hands. But many who will admit this in theory, cannot suppose that it has any bearing on their children. Yet, my dear friends, let me tell you your children are after all only flesh and blood, just like others. Though they are *your* children, they can do wrong; they may be stupid, or lazy, or disobedient, or sulky, or mischievous, or even deceitful; they may need occasionally what very likely they will never get at home — a sound whipping.

Now if such a blessing should befall them, do not at once rise up in indignation against the teacher. Pardon me if I say you must not take the child's account of the affair without some allowance. He may think himself the victim of oppression; for it requires more wisdom and magnanimity than is common in children, to confess that he deserved the punishment, and ought to have received it.

Remember, therefore, that he is immature in judgment: remember that he must be, from his very situation, prejudiced, even if he does not intentionally deceive: remember also that the teacher is not likely to punish needlessly. That race of men who "flogged for the love of it," is well nigh extinct. I am persuaded that the members of this Association regard this as a most unpleasant part of their duty, which, whenever possible, they are glad to avoid.

But, even admitting that the teacher has been hasty and harsh in his discipline, is he to be condemed for a single offence? Because he has given a practical illustra-

tion of the well-known truth that "to err is human," are his pupils to be encouraged to rise up in rebellion against his authority? Common sense, kind feeling, and simple justice, alike answer, No.

Yet we have heard of parents sending their children to school with direct instructions not to obey certain rules, nor submit to threatened punishments. Such a course is an outrage on the rights of the teacher, — an outrage on all true principles of school management, — as well as a most serious injury to the scholar. One thus encouraged by parental influence in resistance to rightful authority, cannot be tolerated in the school; he will diffuse a spirit of insubordination; he must either be made to submit, and taught that there is a higher law dominant there than parental partiality, or be expelled. The teacher's authority must be upheld: when that is undermined, his usefulness is over.

In the 7th and last place, parents *should show to their children that they feel an interest in their studies.* However faithful and laborious the teacher, unless there is awakened in the pupils a desire for knowledge, but little will be accomplished. Hence, besides sending the child to school and confiding him to the full guidance and discipline of his instructor, the parent is to stimulate him to an interest in his studies. And how can he better do this than by making them the topic of conversation at home? What a gain it would be, if the vague generalities of ordinary table talk, and the empty, if not malicious, details of daily gossip could be supplanted by sober and rational intercourse, of a character to instruct and expand the mind. Let the lessons of the school be talked over at home; the narratives of the reading-book be recited; the facts of geography or history be repeated;

let the child be encouraged to tell of his difficulties and successes; let parents show that what interests their children is of importance to them, however trifling in itself: and would there not be an impulse communicated, which would make the labors of the school-room less irksome, and its triumphs far more eagerly desired? Well do I remember with what admiration I once looked upon a noble boy, bearing off prize after prize at an exhibition, and the moment the exercises were over, hastening to his mother, casting his trophies into her lap, and seeming to find his most precious recompense, his best reward, in the look of sympathy and love which beamed from her glistening eyes.

Let children but feel that the hopes of their dearest friends are garnered up in their success, that their negligence or misconduct will most deeply wound those fond hearts, and they will have a talisman, a stimulus in the thought that will work wonders.

On the other hand, let the parent be so indifferent, as never to inquire into the progress of his little ones, nor speak to them concerning their studies, and he has no right to expect them to be very earnest themselves. If he hears that they are idle and poor scholars, he ought to take to himself at least a part of the blame. Yet to how very many would this condemnation apply.

Such are the principal duties of parents in aid of the teacher, which have occurred to me. I need not delay you now in order to urge at any length their performance. I make my appeal directly to parental affection. I say to those who sustain that relation, Behold your children; within them are powers yet undeveloped; before them is a future, yet undetermined. Now is the period of

growth and formation; and you in a great measure are to be the moulders of their destiny. They may never be numbered with the great, or rich, or renowned of the earth; but they may every one be intelligent, virtuous, and so, useful and happy. Does there not rise in your hearts, as by an inspiration from Heaven, an earnest desire that they may be thus blessed? Are you not ready to say that in every way possible, by daily care and watchfulness you will help them on?

These teachers ask your aid. By requesting me to speak on this topic, they have shown their desire for your coöperation. *Shall they not have it?*

Permit me, in conclusion, to suggest to the members of this Association, that they have duties corresponding to the duties of parents to them. If they seek sympathy and respect, they must strive to be worthy of it, by showing a true devotedness to their honorable calling. If they claim to be left unrestricted in the management and discipline of school, they must seek to establish a character for moderation, impartiality, good judgment, and love for their pupils. If they would have children sent with regularity, they must give them a welcome when they come, make the school-room a pleasant place,— and though amid difficulties and discouragements, endeavor perseveringly to fulfil the parents' hopes. And by visiting, perhaps by calling meetings of the parents, — in all ways which their own good sense will suggest, they are to seek as well as to desire, parental coöperation. If they stand aloof, they must not complain if they are neglected. For you, I am confident these hints will be enough. You will not be wanting in your duties when parents and scholars are found faithful to theirs. And when all combine, with a three-fold union in aim and

effort, success must follow. Parents will rejoice in the accomplishment of their fondest wishes; teachers, in the consciousness of usefulness, find their highest, purest reward; and children, trained in our free schools, grow up to be the ornaments of society, and the strength of our land.

Our school system is the boast of our Commonwealth. Her territory is small, her soil comparatively sterile and rocky, her climate harsh; but general intelligence has tempered the winds that blow round the homes of her favored sons; — has given her greater resources than though she had been founded on mines of silver and gold; — has made the domain of her influence wide as the globe. She will need to interfere by no armed intervention, to help on the progress of mankind. Her moral force, the honor of her fair name, the power of her good example, will go forth to bless the nations, like the light which at the word of God came streaming across the desolations of chaos. Her mission will be peaceful, but glorious; and her name, linked to the educational system which originated within her boundaries, will endure forever.

Be it ours to see, that among the jewels that glitter in her crown, there shall none shine brighter than that placed there by Norfolk.

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